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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000343

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SUBJECT: QUIET PROGRESS ON DEMIL DESPITE ELECTION FRENZY;
DEFMIN FOCUSES ON HIS JOB

Classified By: DCM Stephen Cristina for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Despite fears that all progress would be held hostage to the national election frenzy, the Government of Albania (GOA) has recently made significant progress on demilitarization. Most significantly, the GOA has finally allowed commencement of industrial demil at Polican, where the USG is funding the demilitarization of 82mm mortars. Work also continues to progress at Mjekes (160mm mortars) as well as with the clean-up of Gerdec. MoD contacts have told Post - and Defense Minister Oketa has confirmed - that Oketa is minimally involved in the election campaign and instead is staying focused on his job as Defense Minister. It seems unlikely that he will remain DefMin after June 28. End Summary.

POLICAN FINALLY BEGINS

¶2. (U) After almost ten months of continuous delays - and despite heated complaints by Oketa at the appalling state of disrepair at the Polican demil facility - in mid-May 2009, the MOD allowed commencement of the U.S.-funded 82mm demil line at Polican. The final hurdle was for the U.S. contractor Armor Group to sign a contract with the AAF Support Command for reimbursement of fuel costs for the transportation of munitions from depots to Polican. After remaining disagreements were cleared up with the Commander of Support Command BG Qiriazi, on May 27 the contract was signed and Polican is now fully functional. To date, around 76 tons of 82mm have been demilitarized. Providing momentum is kept through the elections, the goal is to demil approximately 500 tons by July 31 (out of 13,000 tons). Polican has submitted to the MOD a list of needed upgrades and DOD contractor Cubic is working with the MOD to find funds to pay for these upgrades. The Danish government plans to donate two bandsaws in July, which will significantly increase efficiency.

MJEKES RESUMES WORK; GERDEC CONTINUES PROGRESS

¶3. (U) Likewise, after a brief suspension due to the dangerous buildup of propellant, demilitarization at Mjekes resumed full functionality in early May 2009, after the destruction of the propellant. While nitro-cellulose and RDX remain in Area C of Mjekes, they do not pose as imminent a danger as the propellant. Nevertheless, the AAF is continuing with the destruction of the nitrocellulose and will then destroy the RDX. To date, at Mjekes, 437 tons of 160mm have been destroyed (out of approximately 3,000 tons).

¶4. (U) Also surprisingly, despite serious past disagreements and hard feelings, the cleanup of Gerdec appears to be

progressing smoothly, and AAF officers who were previously very negative have recently shared their high regard for progress at Gerdec and for the professionalism of staff working there. To date, approximately 2,000 tons of munitions have been recovered from Gerdec (out of approximately 6,000). Recovery is slower now that the contractor is focusing on discovering buried munitions.

OKETA STAYS FOCUSED ON HIS JOB

15. (C) Some of this progress can be attributed to Defense Minister Oketa's continued attention to demilitarization. In all meetings with foreign visitor's Oketa stresses that demil is his second highest priority. Post contacts in the MOD, including Oketa's personal advisors, note that Oketa is not very involved in the national election, even though he is on the ruling party's list of candidates. They say he is determined to stay focused on his job as Defense Minister until the last day. Oketa has confirmed these comments in meetings with foreign visitors. Another factor may also be the fact that he is unlikely to continue as Defense Minister regardless of who wins the June 28 elections. Oketa has been placed third on the PD list for Durrës. While his election to parliament is assured, this is surprisingly low for a sitting Minister of Defense. Oketa's likely departure from the Ministry is another reason to press to maintain momentum on demil through the elections.

OPEN-RANGE DETONATION

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16. (U) The next large hurdle for demil will be reactivating open-detonation ranges, originally scheduled to begin April 1, but indefinitely delayed. While two ranges have been used for the destruction of fuses, none of the ranges are currently suitable for the destruction of actual munitions, nor is the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) EOD staff sufficiently trained to conduct weapons destruction. According to EUCOM EOD assessment, the GOA will need significant foreign support to conduct open-detonation, and the GOA has shown openness to this support. Post has suggested, and CHOD has requested, that U.S. contractors take over the two largest ranges and open detonation at these ranges. Post will explore with the MOD what is necessary for this to take place. A likely time-frame would be to commence U.S.-contracted munitions destruction by the beginning of 2010.

WITHERS